



February 2014

## The Push for Plain Language, and its Connections to Continuous Improvement

In the mid-1990s, somewhere in the nation's capital, a community of federal government employees gathered in pursuit of a common mission. That mission: to make sure all federal government communications were clear and easy to understand, written in plain English and organized in a logical way.

That plain language mission was more elaborate and challenging than one might think. But a couple decades later, the aims of that community of federal workers – initially called the Plain English Network and now called the [Plain Language Action and Information Network \(PLAIN\)](#) – are not some pursuit far out on the horizon, they are standard operating procedure in D.C. A set of [plain language guidelines](#) authored by PLAIN are now commonly used by federal government organizations. And in 2010, President Obama signed the [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#), requiring federal agencies to make their communication clear and easy for the public to understand and use.

The federal government isn't alone in buying into these concepts. Today, the words "plain language" often refer to a specific methodology and the organizational initiatives that spring from that, much in the same way that the words continuous improvement (CI) are used. In Minnesota, plain language efforts are taking shape in 2014. The Department of Revenue has made great progress under its own plain language initiative and the rest of Minnesota's state agencies are beginning to follow, developing initiatives and assembling a community of champions akin to PLAIN, with leadership support from the Governor's Office.

If you've ever received a letter from a bank, an insurance company, or even a government entity that you had to read multiple times to fully understand, you can see what might prompt many plain language initiatives like these. If you've ever had to say to a doctor, a lawyer or an IT person, "What does that mean in layman's terms?!", you can probably see the inherent value of the plain language mindset.

And if you're a continuous improvement professional or a Lean thinker, you might connect the dots further, noting that plain language aligns very closely with CI. When constituents and customers are re-reading documents to understand them – and from there are potentially calling an office for assistance or responding with incomplete or inaccurate information – that's waste, for an organization and for its customers, and it leads to defects, to rework and to various other problems.

To this end, CI leaders and experts might be mindful of plain language when participating in CI projects.

### Inside this issue

[CI and Plain Language](#)

[Dept. of Admin Kaizen](#)

[New Training Courses](#)

[Upcoming Lean Events](#)

### Want to learn more about Plain Language?

Head to [PlainLanguage.gov](#) and the [Center for Plain Language](#) for more info!

Is a team member continually bringing up a certain form or document in a kaizen event or root cause analysis? If revamping materials is part of the improvement effort, plain language methods can be a valuable tool. Conversely, if an organization is beginning a plain language initiative, it shouldn't miss opportunities to work in tandem with existing CI initiatives – facilitated CI tools can be a great way to direct a team in reworking documents and other materials.

One of the core tenets of the plain language approach is to communicate and write from the customer's point of view, ever mindful of what the reader needs to do with information they receive. It's a direct connection to the world of CI, where the customer and their perspective on value act as the guiding light for everything an organization does.

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## Department of Admin Takes a Closer Look at the Accounts Payable Process

The Minnesota Department of Administration (Admin) recently held a Kaizen event on its accounts payable transactions. With a primary goal of increasing Admin's prompt pay percentage, the team went to work to understand, document and improve its processes.

For the event, staff were gathered from across the agency, with representation from many of Admin's diverse business units. While most state agencies manage their accounts payable processes centrally, Admin is unique because of its numerous divisions and the wide-ranging types of transactions processed. When you're paying for everything from cars to construction contracts to workers compensation claims, the procedures and parties involved are understandably complex and varied.



*The Department of Admin Kaizen team and the swim lane maps documenting the Accounts Payable processes.*

For this reason, a large focus of the event was documenting the current accounts payable processes across each business unit. In doing this, the team strived to enhance cross-agency knowledge of processes and enable stronger backup of critical accounting functions.

Furthermore, the team outlined standard, recommended procedures to be used for common transactions. These efforts, combined with a list of future action items – such as implementing new stamps for item receipt and payment authorization – will bring more uniformity to the agency's procedures and help Admin process more payments on time. In the days ahead, staff at all levels of agency will be trained on the updated processes, and that education will be key to the team's long-term efforts and success.

The State of Minnesota has an enterprise-wide goal that 98 percent of its payments be completed promptly – defined as 30 days or less. As the Admin team documents the learning from this Kaizen event and implements its action plan, that goal is within reach.

## Expanded Training Programs Coming This Spring

For many years now, the Minnesota Office of Continuous Improvement has offered two basic training programs – Lean 101 and Kaizen Facilitator Training. In spring 2014, we are excited to introduce expanded training offerings from our office. Take a look at our new portfolio of courses:

- **Lean 101** – We will continue to offer this half-day training that introduces attendees to continuous improvement (CI) and its basic principles, methods and tools for removing waste and enhancing value and efficiency.
- **Kaizen Facilitator Training** – Those wishing to facilitate Kaizen process improvement events can continue to take this two-day training. Participants will learn the detailed steps in an event and will have an opportunity to build their facilitation and swim lane mapping skills.
- **Leading and Supporting Kaizen Events and Improvement Projects** – This one-day training is intended for those who want to know more about Kaizen events, but who don't wish to facilitate them. For those who wish to sponsor an event, lead a Kaizen team or simply participate on one, this a great way to learn about the flow of an event, roles and responsibilities, best practices for CI projects, and more.
- **Problem Solving Training** – This half-day training covers problem solving in CI, with a focus on root cause analysis and tools like the 5 Why's, Fishbone diagrams and more.
- **Other On-Demand Training Courses** – Various other trainings are available by request. Our team can come to your office to provide training programs geared specifically to your needs. Past examples include trainings on process mapping, SIPOC diagrams, the Workout Method, Supporting CI as a Senior Leader, and more.

More info about these expanded training programs will be posted online soon. You can review upcoming dates in the Upcoming Events column at right, and stay tuned to [mnlean.eventbrite.org](http://mnlean.eventbrite.org) to see complete details and register for training. If you have questions or would like to discuss on-demand training, contact us at [lean@state.mn.us](mailto:lean@state.mn.us).

### Upcoming Events

**March 3-7**, MN Historical Society

Hiring Kaizen Event, [Details](#)

**March 13**, MN CI User Group

Session, [RSVP](#)

**March 18**, Lean 101, **Full**

[\(Waitlist\)](#)

**April 8**, Lean 101, [Register](#)

*5 seats remaining*

**April 9-10**, Kaizen Facilitator

Training, [Register](#) *4 seats remaining*

**April 17**, MN CI User Group

Session, [RSVP](#)

**May 6**, Lean 101

**May 7**, Leading Improvement

Projects *NEW*

**June 12**, Lean 101

**June 12**, Problem Solving with CI

*NEW*

**June 16-17**, Kaizen Facilitator

Training

**Aug. 5**, Lean 101

**Aug. 6-7**, Kaizen Facilitator

Training

**Sept. 8**, Lean 101

**Sept. 8**, Problem Solving with CI

*NEW*

**Sept. 11**, Leading Improvement

Projects *NEW*

**Oct. 6**, Lean 101

**Oct. 7-8**, Kaizen Facilitator

Training

**Nov. 3**, Lean 101

**Nov. 3**, Problem Solving with CI

*NEW*

**Nov. 4**, Leading Improvement

Projects *NEW*

**Dec. 2**, Lean 101

**Dec. 3-4**, Kaizen Facilitator

Training

View all Lean events at

[www.lean.state.mn.us/calendar](http://www.lean.state.mn.us/calendar)

Registration for upcoming

trainings will open soon – stay

tuned to [mnlean.eventbrite.org](http://mnlean.eventbrite.org)